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Opportunity or threat? What Plan S can contribute to Open Access in Latin America



Concerns about the threat from the Global North to Latin America's exemplary tradition of open access publishing are understandable but ultimately misplaced. Renegotiation of subscription agreements and the stipulation that article-processing charges should be covered by funders or institutions are examples of the ways in which Plan S presents new opportunities for the region, even if there is still work to be done, writes [Johan Rooryck](#) (cOAlition S).

• This post is a response to Aguado López & Becerril García [AmeliCA before Plan S – The Latin American Initiative to develop a cooperative, non-commercial, academic led, system of scholarly communication](#) and was first published on the [LSE Latin America and Caribbean Blog](#).

Recently, [concerns](#) have [been raised](#) about the consequences that Plan S, an initiative of the cOAlition S [consortium of research funders](#) aiming to provide free online access to all research literature, will have for existing non-commercial and not-for-profit open access initiatives. These concerns focus particularly on the threat to Latin America's strong tradition of open access publishing. In responding to [these concerns](#), I argue that Plan S has many synergies with this vibrant and exemplary tradition of open access publishing, and this will create real opportunities for future development.

Latin America's exemplary open access tradition

Let me begin by saying that Latin America has been doing open access right from the very beginning. If we had the opportunity to start academic publishing from scratch, this is certainly the way we would choose to go about it: academic-led, not-for-profit, technically proficient, and scientifically sound open access publishing.

It is also true that while Latin America was developing open access the right way, the rest of the world was taken over by commercial and society publishers that extracted great profits or surpluses from relatively indolent Northern and Western research communities. This meant that academic publishing gradually became increasingly unsustainable, with subscription prices outpacing library budgets. As a result, many academic publishers have now completely lost the trust of the academic community that they claim to serve.

Try as we might, however, we cannot wish the commercial publishers away. This is why Plan S engages squarely with commercial publishers, pursuing transparent, transformational agreements and transparent pricing. In essence, Plan S encourages commercial publishers to regain the trust that they squandered. COAlition S encourages library consortia and publishers to pursue transformative agreements that are at the very least cost-neutral, in the spirit of the global [OA2020 initiative](#) “[to transform] today's scholarly journals from the current subscription (paywall) system to new open access publishing models that enable unrestricted use and re-use of scholarly outputs and assure transparency and sustainability of publishing costs.” We know that there is enough money in the publishing system to transition to open access without additional costs. This contention is not even contested by commercial publishers themselves.



Open access opportunities for Latin America

In this context, the negotiating power of library consortia should not be underestimated. For example, even without a transformational agreement, the recently formed library consortium of university libraries in Colombia ([Consortio Colombia](#)) was able to [negotiate down its subscriptions](#) with a number of publishers, while at the same time obtaining greater access to titles all across the country. The experience gained from such negotiations can be transferred into discussions about transformative agreements, a model for converting subscription costs to publish-and-read deals that is promoted and shared worldwide by [OA2020](#), with which cOAlition S is also aligned.

This creates an opportunity. Latin America currently spends \$300 million on subscriptions with commercial publishers. Imagine if this expense could be reduced by 5 to 10 per cent as a result of a united front of national and regional consortia operating in line with identical negotiating principles and informed by the experience of OA2020 and the [University of California Libraries](#). A successful renegotiation of current subscription costs would mean that between \$15 million and \$30 million could become available for alternative academic publishing models, though this would of course require a concerted effort to keep these savings where they belong: in the academic community.

Dealing with article processing charges

Another synergy between Plan S and Latin American open access publishing lies in the pledge from cOAlition S funders that it is funders and research institutions who will pay for open access publication fees (Principle 4). For funders and research institutions, paying for open access fees is the easiest way to participate in the costs of open access publishing. A payment for a transparently priced service per unit of publication is more easily scalable, simpler to manage, and easier to justify than arbitrary investments in not-for-profit publishing infrastructure that funders do not control and which may be viewed as interference in the market.

The objection against a payment per publication is that in this way Plan S upholds the article-processing charge (APC) system, but this is not quite correct. The most legitimate objection against APCs is that they require authors to find the money to pay for their publications. But Plan S has eliminated this obstacle: the funder or institution pays the publisher, not the author. Hence, the publication fee becomes a transaction strictly between the funder or institution and the publisher.

There is no clear reason why academic-led, non-commercial, not-for-profit publishers would spurn this kind of revenue stream. Certainly, non-commercial publishers can transparently calculate the cost per article, and they could – with proper agreement – request payment from cOAlition S members and research institutions to cover these costs for articles authored by their grantees. This can be achieved without compromising any of their non-commercial principles. Moreover, such a novel interaction of non-commercial publishers with funders and institutions would allow for transparency of costs per article, as well as enabling interesting comparisons with the prices charged by commercial publishers.

Work still to be done

Admittedly, these proposals leave some issues unresolved. For instance, to the extent that Plan S is successful in converting journals to APC-based open access, it may lock out authors without a funder or institution that is able to pay the publication fee, yet waivers for authors in this position can be viewed as patronising.

However, if the payment is part of a negotiation taking place between the funder or institution and the publisher, the author is not involved and need not feel patronised. Even now, full open access publishers use a sliding scale for payment that depends on a number of factors. Local purchasing power could be one of those factors.

Overall, Plan S creates more opportunities than threats for Latin American open Access publishing. Our aim should be to work together to take advantage of these opportunities wherever they arise, and ultimately to make full and immediate open access a global reality.

About the author

Johan Rooryck is Open Access Champion for cOAlition S. He is Professor of French Linguistics at Leiden University (Netherlands). He has over 20 years' experience as an editor, first as the Executive Editor of *Lingua* (Elsevier) and since 2015 as the founder and Editor-in-Chief of the Fair Open Access journal *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*. He is President of the Quality Open Access Market (QOAM), founding member and President of the Fair Open Access Alliance (FOAA), founding member of Mathematics in Open Access (MathOA) and Psychology in Open Access (PsyOA), founding member and President of Linguistics in Open Access (LingOA), and Member of the Academia Europaea.

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